

VZCZCXRO8604
PP RUEHBZ RUEH DU RUEHMR RUEHPA RUEHRN RUEHTRO
DE RUEHLC #0246/01 1531622
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 021622Z JUN 09
FM AMEMBASSY LIBREVILLE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1185
INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LIBREVILLE 000246

SIPDIS

KINSHASA PLEASE ALSO PASS BRAZZAVILLE
YAOUNDE PLEASE ALSO PASS MALABO
AF/C PLEASE ALSO PASS BANGUI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/02/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PHUM](#) [FR](#) [GB](#)
SUBJECT: GABON: POLITICAL SCENE IN FLUX WITH PRESIDENT
HOSPITALIZED AND DEFENSE MINISTER AILING

REF: LIBREVILLE 0220

Classified By: DCM Nathan Holt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Gabon's political scene remains in flux with President El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba hospitalized with a serious illness in Spain and his son the Defense Minister (and possible heir-apparent) Ali Bongo visibly weakened after recent hospitalization for an intestinal problem. Ali's half-sister Pascaline Bongo and her political allies appear to be playing a more assertive role in government, but it is not clear even to inside players who is in charge. The president's suspected cancer, and the gravity of his current condition, remain widely known but officially unacknowledged.
End Summary.

President Still Hospitalized in Spain

¶2. (C) President Bongo is in a more stable condition after four weeks of hospitalization in Spain, Defense Minister Ali Bongo told the Ambassador May 30. Ali Bongo said little about the president's prognosis, and did not say when the president will return home. Ali Bongo also did not acknowledge widespread reports that President Bongo is suffering from cancer. He did admit, however, that Gabon is undergoing a "very, very stressful period" as a result of the president's health crisis.

¶3. (C) Ali Bongo said depression, diabetes and general "weakening" all play a part in the president's current health difficulties. President Bongo began to suffer from a serious depression about two months before the death of his wife Edith Lucie Bongo Ondimba, Ali Bongo said. Edith Bongo, who was also the daughter of Republic of Congo (Brazzaville) President Denis Sassou-Nguesso, died after a protracted illness in Morocco March 13.

¶4. (C) President Bongo was affected by frequent travel to Morocco, and by wrangling with his in-law and fellow president Sassou-Nguesso, Ali Bongo reported. Matters worsened between the two presidents after Edith Bongo died. Sassou-Nguesso's insistence on multiple ceremonies--one in Libreville and another in Brazzaville, with burial in Mrs. Bongo's home village in ROC--was "not traditional," Ali Bongo asserted, and was "not respectful" of his father. This took a toll on President Bongo's health and led to a significant worsening in relations between the two families.

¶5. (C) Ali Bongo said his father opted for hospitalization in Spain on the advice of respected American neurosurgeon Dr.

Keith Black. Dr. Black is among the physicians who treated Edith Bongo in the terminal stages of her still-undisclosed illness. President Bongo is receiving good treatment in Spain, Ali Bongo reported, but is harassed by French journalists who "even tried to check into rooms" at the hospital to gather information on the president's condition. President Bongo refused to travel to France for treatment because of what he believes are officially sanctioned anti-corruption lawsuits pending in the French courts, Ali Bongo said. Ali Bongo also asserted that "French journalists" are behind recent internet reports that President Bongo is already dead.

¶6. (C) Though widely available on the internet and in international radio broadcasts, details of President Bongo's treatment in Spain are suppressed in Gabonese media reports. Most local media have merely repeated the government's bland assertions that President Bongo is in Spain for "rest" and a medical checkup. The media have also been extremely circumspect in writing or speculating about succession--a subject one senior government official deemed "inappropriate". On May 25 the Gabonese National Communication Council (CNC in its French acronym) shut down two small newspapers for crossing the line. The first paper, an obscure tabloid known as "Ezombolo", was shut down for six months; a second, "Le Nganga", was suspended for one month.

Ali Bongo Also Sick . . .

¶7. (C) Ali Bongo, who appeared to have lost weight and was
LIBREVILLE 00000246 002 OF 002

visibly weak and drawn during our meeting, also described his own health problems. He had recently been hospitalized in Europe for an intestinal problem, Ali Bongo admitted, and remained under a doctor's care in Libreville with orders to restrict his activities to "one meeting a day." He described the condition as "very painful" and said he continued to receive medication and nourishment through an IV. Ali Bongo introduced the Ambassador to his mother, Patience Dabany, who was visiting him to ensure he was following "doctor's orders." Dabany has also been a figure of some controversy recently, appearing on television to refute charges that Ali Bongo is a Nigerian orphan adopted by the Bongo family during the Biafran war.

¶8. (C) Ali's disappearance for medical care in Europe and the same time as his father's serious illness inevitably prompted rumors and political speculation in Gabon. Some asserted the whole trip was a ruse, diverting attention from consultation with the French or other alleged scheming. Others believe Ali Bongo was poisoned. The Defense Minister is nevertheless believed to have pre-existing intestinal or gastric problems, and admitted himself that the "very stressful" political situation in Gabon had contributed to his health problems.

Who's In Charge?

¶9. (C) Despite his poor health, Ali Bongo staged a televised meeting with senior generals May 29, ostensibly to review plans for an upcoming joint Gabon-China military medical exercise. Over the last several weeks, Ali Bongo has also authorized increased security patrolling in Libreville overnight, which many see as a reminder of his authority.

¶10. (C) Ali Bongo's half-sister Pascaline Bongo, the president's chief of staff, also returned to Libreville on or about May 28. Pascaline Bongo had overseen her father's care in Spain, and her return was viewed as evidence that President Bongo's life is not in immediate danger. While in Spain, Pascaline Bongo was joined by other powerful

officials, including her long-time consort Foreign Minister Paul Toungui and Presidential advisor Jean-Pierre Lemboumba-Lepandou. All are seen as political rivals of Ali Bongo. With access to the president cut off for most politicians the circle around him, led by Pascaline Bongo, has wielded more authority.

¶11. (C) For his part, Ali Bongo says he is confident Gabon will follow its constitutional norms in any succession scenario. According to an American businessman who met with Pascaline Bongo after her recent return to Libreville, the president's daughter also claims that her father insists that Gabon's constitution be followed. More worrisomely, Ali Bongo told the Ambassador that he faces more opposition from within his party (and therefore his family) than from the official opposition. In fact, Ali Bongo claimed, some of his political opponents in the ruling Parti Democratique Gabonais (PDG) had reached out to European arms dealers about potential purchases of weapons.

Comment

¶12. (C) The strange mixture of state and family politics that long marked the Bongo era has become even stranger in the current circumstances. It is reassuring that two key players--Defense Minister Ali Bongo and presidential Chief of Staff Pascaline Bongo--both claim to be committed to the current constitutional rules on succession, which envision an election within 45 days of the president's death. Should Omar Bongo remain indefinitely incapacitated, however, the current scheming will only get worse. End Comment.
REDDICK